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## Imagining Boston: The City as Image and Experience

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## Imagining Boston: The City as Image and Experience

Shaun O'Connell

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I think there are two ways in which place is known and cherished, two ways which may be complementary but which are just as likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other is learned, literate and conscious. In the literary sensibility, both are likely to co-exist in a conscious and unconscious tension: this tension and the poetry it produces are what I want to discuss.

—Seamus Heaney, “The Sense of Place,” in  
*Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978*

I want to discuss community and imagery, social division and literary unity, Boston poetry and prose. In most issues of *NEJPP* I will focus upon those recent books that fire our imaginations and help us shape our sense of local and regional place. In this issue, however, I want to look back at the tradition of imagery that resonates in Boston's history. Old ideas of Boston are quickly being buried under layers of architectural and cultural renewal. While the suburbs become more urbanized and the commuter roads more clogged, downtown Boston is in the midst of the greatest building boom since after the fire of 1872. The graceful, Florentine Custom House, once Boston's tallest building, will soon be overshadowed by the massive International Place complex, just as the Bulfinch State House has long been crowded by glass boxes along Boston's skyline. The new Boston seems aggressive, glitzy, pricey, a consumer's fortress, like the vast mall-and-hotel complex called Copley Place. Still, other less looming images of Boston persist, as Henry James discovered after he found his home on Ashburton Place razed, and as Robert Lowell discovered amid the rubble of the excavations for the garage under the Boston Common. Boston's real treasures, finally, are not its buildings but the images of permanence created in James's *American Scene*, Lowell's “For the Union Dead,” and many other works. In this issue of *NEJPP* it would be timely to look back at that informing body of imagery. Only by knowing who we have been can we possibly understand who we are and how each of us is linked to ideas of place, this place: Boston.

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The City upon a Hill has been Boston's central, recurrent image, positing an elevated, spiritual, fixed *place*. Other images amplify, modify. The Athens of America designation is an effort to convert this spiritual vision into cultural terms. Hub of the Universe is a hyperbolic trope that suggests new American commercial and social energies which, in fact, often let Boston dangle like a fifth wheel. Above all, it is the City upon a Hill image which, however much Boston expanded and divided against itself, reminded us of who we thought we might be and still stands as an emblem of what we yet might become. This image—at once literary, political, and spiritual—stands as Boston's great achievement. As the city has grown larger and more various, it has had more to battle over; at the same time, our sense of ourselves as one people, as Bostonians, has been steadily renewed by our writers, those who read the topography, traced the genealogies, and kept the commemorative albums of Boston's tense family history.

I have never lived in Boston. Instead, I have either approached it with the eagerness of a provincial or have entered Boston proper, center city, with the wariness of a suburbanite without a resident sticker. I approach Boston from the west: from Route 2, where, from a hill in Belmont, the city shimmers with promise; or from the Massachusetts Turnpike, which, after the toll booth in Allston, provides you with a quick glance at the Charles River, then carries you by the Back Bay business complex; often you then find yourself stalled on the clotted Central Artery, at which point you have time to brood, in proper Puritan fashion, upon the metaphysical and moral implications of all you have seen.

I realize my visitor's view is selective; I have composed my own Boston out of the array of its offerings. First of these, for me, was the Braves Field of Tommy Holmes's era, then the Fenway Park of Ted Williams's reign, then the Boston Garden of Bill Russell's province. The movie palaces along Washington Street. Later, Scollay Square, Columbus Avenue jazz spots, and North End restaurants; later yet, Beacon Hill dinner parties and Swan Boat rides for my children, who came to Boston with their own images of anticipation, shaped by McCloskey's *Make Way for the Ducklings* and White's *Trumpet of the Swan*.<sup>1</sup> So too would I come to Boston, like the birds in these stories, drawn by its sounds, sights, and other felicities. I speak not from my experience of daily life in Boston, but, rather, of Boston life as I have composed it in my selective experience and embellished it in my imagination.

The life that I can speak to with blood knowledge occurred thirty miles west of Boston, in Marlborough, Massachusetts, where I grew up—another country of fact and feeling. Marlborough was static and small then: its population had expanded only from 13,609 in 1900 to 15,787 in 1950. It was homogeneous, self-contained in its provinciality. Until my friends and I left for Korea or college, few of us went anywhere. (Thus Boston was our Paris or our Bangkok when we cut high school classes and went into town, timorous would-be sailors on a spree.) In Marlborough, my friends and I sat on the high school wall, watching cars cruise up and down Main Street, turning at the World War I monument; we shot pool at Bibbie's or we leaned against another wall in front of the Colonial, a spa across the street, scheming our escapes. My Marlborough was a place of muffled ethnic and class tensions. My Marlborough was the place that housed



John Brown's bell, stolen from Harper's Ferry during the Civil War. My Marlborough was the place where, when you came of age, you went to work in the shoe shops or you got out. It was Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, John Updike's Olinger, or James Joyce's Dublin: the place you wanted to leave behind when you sought a world elsewhere. Surely this might seem weak preparation for a meditation on Boston.

Perhaps not. In *Province of Reason*, Sam Bass Warner, Jr., gives Boston a broader geographic reach than I could have imagined when I lived in Marlborough. "Today the Boston metropolis, with more than six million people, stretches outward approximately eighty-odd miles from the old parent city."<sup>2</sup> Further, Warner caught my attention with a chapter on Marlborough titled "Failure of Community." He focuses upon the successful efforts by shoe manufacturers to break the shoeworkers' union in 1898–1899, an effort that resulted in the loss of jobs for two thousand workers and the reduction of the city's population by one-third. Warner uses Marlborough—a city that has more than doubled in size since 1950, thriving on high tech and its central location—as a model community of "experiences whose meaning has been lost."<sup>3</sup> For half a century the mills and factories set themselves against their workers, then moved out, and no one did anything about it. "There was public suffering, but no public power or responsibility."<sup>4</sup>

As I read Warner's version of Marlborough, I remembered the social tensions from my boyhood days, particularly between the Italian and Irish communities. They were a perpetuation of the animosities that surrounded the strike of 1898–1899, when, according to *The WPA Guide to Massachusetts*, Italian strikebreakers replaced Irish laborers.<sup>5</sup> Tensions flared between the Big House families—the shop owners and their circle, who lived in big houses up the hill on Pleasant Street—and the rest of us, whose parents were shaped by memories of the depression. No wonder some of us could not wait to get out. Our Marlborough was a microcosm: a polity united on one level against common enemies, particularly during World War II, but divided along caste and class lines, a condition made worse by enforced proximity and limited opportunities. Seen that way, Marlborough may have been an instructive social laboratory in which to learn certain principles applicable to Boston.

Boston's history is characterized by even more pervasive social divisions, but Boston offers in compensation an ideal vision of itself which, unlike Marlborough, renews its sense of communal, political, and literary life. Boston has a sense of itself, reflected in its imagery. The *myth* of Boston redeems the city. Only Route 495 and its high-tech industries could revive Marlborough.

I could see my Marlborough writ large in *Common Ground*, J. Anthony Lukas's study of Boston during the so-called busing crisis of the mid-1970s, for Lukas's Boston was also divided along territorial, racial, ethnic, and class lines, its citizens, sensing encroachment, struggling over limited turf and reduced economic opportunities.<sup>6</sup> In my Marlborough of the forties and fifties these tensions were muffled by patriotism and conformity; in Lukas's Boston of the 1970s, these tensions explode, but, as his title indicates, he sought the outlines of a myth of community beneath the fractured surface of Boston's recent history.

Lukas's Bostonians are honorable men and women, not the hot racists and cold reformers of popular conception. By alternating point of view and entering

the stream of consciousness of his major characters, Lukas creates a work of art in which we gradually suspend judgment and come to see divided Boston from several persuasive perspectives. Yet we never see these families stand together, because his material, the recent history of Boston, will not yield the evidence his myth demands. In the eyes of some, *Common Ground* provides an inadequate representation of the Boston community. Thomas I. Atkins, counsel for black plaintiffs in Boston's school desegregation case, calls *Common Ground* a "tragedy" that omits portrayals of black leaders "whose roles . . . dwarf" those of the white leaders who are portrayed.<sup>7</sup> Lukas's book, juxtaposing selected racial, class, and ethnic representations, provides the brief illusion of common ground for a still divided city. His wish for common ground in Boston translates into *Common Ground*, a territory of imagination on which divided citizens can stand together, though they might stand separately in the Boston of fact.

Lukas portrays division but construes a salvific myth. He does this, in part, by making Boston's history a common ground, aligning the hatreds and ideals of current Boston with those of its original settlers. When he writes of Irish Americans who moved into Charlestown, he invokes John Winthrop's image of an earthly New Jerusalem, when *his* settlement arrived in Charlestown in 1630. Winthrop envisioned Boston as "the city upon a hill," an image that inspired and haunted succeeding generations, says Lukas. As Charlestown became a settlement of Irish-American workers, it shaped a notion of community into Townie ethnocentricity. For Lukas, the Charlestown Irish acted in a Boston cultural tradition.

Just as the Puritans had once sought to build an exclusive fellowship of saints on that peninsula, so now the inheritors of that myth sought refuge in an ethnic haven sealed off from the hostile world.<sup>8</sup>

"Great hatred, little room," said Yeats of Ireland,<sup>9</sup> a formulation that tells us, as well, something about Boston. Boston too is united, like Ireland, more in myth than in fact. Imagery allows Boston a sense of single *place* in compensation for its history of divided enclaves. Metaphors of landscape and weather suggest common grounds and atmospheres that unite Bostonians who live in suspicion of other groups from other ends of the city.

Animosity and constriction were far from the hopes articulated by John Winthrop in "A Model of Christian Charity," a sermon delivered in 1630 aboard the *Arbella* before settlers arrived in the bay of what they called New England. It is a document that defines the particular combination of idealism and anxiety which characterizes later conceptions of Boston. Winthrop spoke to the possibilities of love and community.

We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together: always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body. . . . For we must consider that we shall be like a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.<sup>10</sup>

Here Winthrop imagines Boston, its landscape and its community character, *before* he sets foot on it. To adapt a line from Robert Frost, the land was his before he was the land's. It existed as pure, exalted *idea*, derived from these dissenters' will to believe in its possibility.



England's colonials,  
Possessing what we still were possessed by,  
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.<sup>11</sup>

For Winthrop, Boston must have been a promised land with infinite prospect, what Frost called "the Gift Outright." He was, like F. Scott Fitzgerald's Dutch sailors in *The Great Gatsby*, "face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder."<sup>12</sup> His city upon a hill would stand as a model of Christian community to those sinners in England from whom the Massachusetts Bay Colony was, all but in name, separating.

Boston would be a city of several hills, particularly what was called Trimountain, which encompassed Pemberton (later Cotton Hill), Beacon and Mount Vernon. For 150 years, as Walter Muir Whitehill reminds us, the colonists settled on the level ground of their narrow peninsula with one narrow neck to the mainland, on their tight little island,<sup>13</sup> but the hill, later leveled and unified into the squat and pricey Beacon Hill we know, was their image of affirmation and ascent. Sentry Hill, the high central peak of Trimountain, got its name from the 1634-1635 order of the General Court that "there shalbe forthwith a beacon sett on the sentry hill att Boston, to give notice to the country of any danger."<sup>14</sup> Within fifteen years of the Bay colonists' arrival, then, the hill, the Puritan Acropolis, became Boston's mighty fortress.

There has long been much to guard against. At Ma-re Mount, or Merrymount, on Mount Wollaston, for example, Thomas Morton, in the words of Samuel Eliot Morison, "gathered a knot of boon companions" to live in defiance of Puritan prohibitions, in what Morton himself called "Faire Canaans second self."<sup>15</sup> Early in the twentieth century, Cardinal William O'Connell claimed several high grounds in the territorial battle that has long characterized Boston's ethnic-religious history. As Lukas notes, Cardinal O'Connell set Boston College on Chestnut Hill and a monastery, a convent, a hospital, and a chancery, modeled after a Renaissance palazzo, on Nevin's Hill in Brighton. "Around and about the whole city," said the satisfied O'Connell, "God has set up his fortresses of sacrifice and prayer."<sup>16</sup> Morton's commune and Cardinal O'Connell's Catholic outpost: just what Winthrop must have feared when he told his colonists they must enter into a covenant, a solemn promise of sacrifice to his ideal city upon a hill, or "the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us."<sup>17</sup> Yet Morton and O'Connell built out of their own biblical models of community. From the first, Boston was a beacon, a fort, an evolving image that housed its divided citizens' aspirations and anxieties.

In *Walden* Thoreau said "Some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expressions, to serve a parable maker one day."<sup>18</sup> He harvested metaphors from his bean field. So has the narrow, infertile, stormy land of Boston long provided a fair field for those inclined, like Frost's Oven Bird, to make much of a diminished thing.<sup>19</sup> Experience modifies ideal visions, as Winthrop soon discovered. Settlers had to defend themselves against encroachment by boozers, Quakers, Papists, and other malcontents who sought to impose their visions upon the narrow landscape of Boston.

The weather also threatened. As early as 1630, John White wrote a tract, *A Planter's Plea*, which defended Boston against the charge that it was uninhabitable. "The cold of winter is tolerable," he insisted. There are serpents, but they

do not bite. As for the mosquitoes:

After one year's acquaintance, men make light account of them; some slight defense for hand and face, smoke, and a close house may keep them off.

White's Boston is a place where citizens must turn inward, keep close houses, to protect themselves. In any case, "rich soil" leads to degeneration among its citizens, while "a country such as this" encourages "piety and godliness, . . . sobriety, justice and love."<sup>20</sup>

In the imagination of many settlers, Boston represented both a cold pastoral and a fiery field, a *moral landscape*. Boston's weather was not only, as Twain noted, changeable, it embodied chastening extremes that tested its citizens' characters. Boston meant winter and Quincy meant summer to Henry Adams in his *Education*.

With such standards, the Bostonian could not but develop a double nature. Life was a double thing. . . . Winter and summer, town and country, law and liberty, were hostile, and the man who pretended they were not, was in his eyes a schoolmaster—that is, a man employed to tell lies to little boys. Though Quincy was but two hours' walk from Beacon Hill, it belonged in a different world.<sup>21</sup>

Juxtaposition has long been a favorite Boston mode, a way to stress the unity of diverse elements. Diversities of landscape and weather united a people whose nature was double.

Its atmospheric extremes are stressed in much of the literature set in Boston. A frozen wasteland suits the passionate possessiveness of Olive Chancellor in Henry James's *Bostonians*, where "the long, low bridge . . . crawled, on its staggering posts, across the Charles" in "the general hard, cold void."<sup>22</sup> The same iron-cold, relentless atmosphere appears in William Dean Howells's *Rise of Silas Lapham* as the narrative approaches the moment of Silas's fall, when the winter snow was "beaten down, and beaten black and hard into a solid bed like iron."<sup>23</sup> At the other extreme, in Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence* a man in search of his illicit love comes to Boston only to find the steamy city a site of decadent commentary on his quest. "The streets near the station were full of the smell of beer and coffee and decaying fruit, and a shirt-sleeved populace moved through them with the intimate abandon of boarders going down the passage to the bathroom."<sup>24</sup> Only a steamboat ride away from the city can restore serenity to the lovers. The narrator of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* sets out for a version of Brook Farm in West Roxbury in the midst of an April snowstorm, weather that mocks the fires of reform.<sup>25</sup> In Henry James's *Europeans* an expatriate returns home to face another fierce spring storm. From the Parker House she looks down upon Boston:

The windowpanes were battered by the sleet; the head-stones in the grave-yard beneath seemed to be holding themselves askance to keep it out of their faces. A tall iron railing protected them from the street, and on the other side of the railing an assemblage of Bostonians were trampling about in the liquid snow. Many of them were looking up and down; they appeared to be waiting for something.<sup>26</sup>

Of course, Boston weather is not always bad, and is not, even at its worst,



always so construed by observers. In *Sleepless Nights*, her autobiographical novel, Elizabeth Hardwick recalls a storm in 1954, when she and her husband, Robert Lowell, lived in Boston:

Here I am in Boston, on Marlborough Street, number 239. I am looking out on a snow-storm. It fell like a great armistice, bringing all simple struggles to an end. In the extraordinary snow, people are walking about in wonderful costumes—old coats with fur collars, woolen caps, scarves, boots, leather hiking shoes that shine like copper. Under the yellow glow of the streetlights you begin to imagine what it was like forty years ago. The stillness, the open whiteness—nostalgia and romance in the clean, quiet, white air.<sup>27</sup>

Even at its best, in Hardwick's imagination, Boston muffles passion and struggle under snow and heavy clothing. Its *past* resonates in her mind, not its present. In 1959 Hardwick would write "Boston: The Lost Ideal" to explain her sense of contemporary Boston: "wrinkled, spindly-legged, depleted of nearly all her spiritual and cutaneous oils, provincial, self-esteeming," its days of glory "over at last."<sup>28</sup> For her the claim that Boston constituted the Athens of America amounted to false advertising: "There has never been anything quite like Boston as a creation of the American imagination."<sup>29</sup>

Boston is, as we see, a creation and re-creation of many compensatory myths to which successive writers add embellishments. Certainly Boston—however muffled, chill, humid, or diminished—becomes an occasion for rhetorical release. In fact, the city has been an amazing catalytic converter of complaint into vivid imagery. There is, perhaps, something in its air which takes delight, even in the midst of denunciation, in harvesting tropes and expressions to serve parable makers. We may trace it back to the Puritan impulse to chart an unseen world from the contours of the seen: to keep vivid in their collective imagination the city upon a hill while they were aboard ship or living for a century and a half upon moist lowlands. Or we might trace such writing to what I might call the Dublin theory of creativity: Given such weather, what else could people do but stay indoors and write? In *The Bostonians* and *The Europeans*, James's visitors have to leave Boston for Cape Cod or the suburbs to relax into fine weather. Howells's Silas Lapham is driven out to pastoral Vermont. Hardwick can appreciate only a Boston of "open whiteness," a still rural Boston.

For distinguished residents of Concord in the nineteenth century, Boston's only redemptive element was its proximity to nature. Hawthorne, in 1840, wrote in his *Notebooks*:

I went round and across the Common and stood on the highest point of it, whence I could see miles and miles into the country. Blessed be God for this green tract, and the view which it affords.<sup>30</sup>

The Boston Common, "this green tract," reminded Hawthorne of a pastoral frontier. Arcadia was elsewhere, glimpsed in the midst of the encroaching city. The image of the City upon the Hill had been reduced to a watchtower from which one could see "miles and miles into the country." In Hawthorne's mind, Concord had replaced Boston as the new city upon a hill. In an analogous symbolic transformation, Walden Pond became "earth's eye" to Thoreau.<sup>31</sup> Puritan polity here yields to pastoral self-development. For these writers,



Concord stood in relation to Boston just as Boston had stood in relation to London; the old city was repudiated for the new land, God's country, where you could begin life anew. The American imagination moved inexorably, in an image of Wright Morris, to the "territory ahead,"<sup>32</sup> which was always a re-creation of a lost ideal land of one's imagination. As Adams's Quincy was enlightening near Beacon Hill, Concord's proximity to Boston—for Thoreau, Walden's proximity to Concord, his lesser Boston—was useful for quick comparisons, moral juxtapositions.

Consider, as he recalls it in his 1836 essay, "Nature," Ralph Waldo Emerson crossing the Boston Common. He felt a "perfect exhilaration," but the day was overcast; one could find "perpetual youth," he decided, only in the woods.<sup>33</sup> The Common provided him with an epiphany of transcendence to his Shangri-la. "Build therefore your own world," he urged, rather than accept the imprisonments of Boston's institutional and architectural structures.<sup>34</sup>

Emerson's *Journals* are filled with delightful denunciations of Boston. In 1841 he summed up Boston life as trivial theater:

Life in Boston: A play in two acts, Youth & Age. Toys, dancing school, *Sets*, parties, picture galleries, sleighrides, Nahant, Saratoga Springs, lectures, concerts, *sets* through them all, solicitude & poetry, friendship, ennui, desolation, decline, meanness, plausibility, old age, death.<sup>35</sup>

For all that, Emerson was drawn to Boston, perhaps because it provided him with the necessary, gritty counterpoint to his exalting imagination; Boston was the touchstone to his transcendence, while Concord constituted what Irving Howe has recently called "the American newness."<sup>36</sup> Emerson's Boston smelled, literally, of the past, as Howells's Back Bay would later smell of urban renewal. Getting and spending had laid waste to Boston's ancient moral powers for Emerson, particularly when it supported Webster's 1850 speech in favor of the Fugitive Slave Act. Then it was a disgrace, said Emerson, to be a Bostonian.

Yet Emerson, a founding member of the Saturday Club after all, conveyed an ambivalence about Boston which Thoreau dismissed. In a letter, Thoreau wrote:

The only room in Boston which I visit with alacrity is the gentlemen's room at the Fitchburg depot, where I wait for the cars, sometimes for two hours, to get out of town. It is a paradise [compared] to the Parker House.<sup>37</sup>

Thoreau, like Emerson, was raised in Boston; Concord was his imagined alternative. As a boy he came out to Concord to visit his grandmother; then he first saw pure Walden Pond, "one of the most ancient scenes stamped on the tablets of my memory."<sup>38</sup> The "territory ahead" is his flight past the nets. "Flight," said Wright Morris, about Thoreau and other Concordians, "not from what they had found, but from what they had created—the very culture of cities they had labored to establish."<sup>39</sup>

Boston's poor, nineteenth-century immigrants, of course, saw Boston culture differently. Boston was not only not Europe, it also embodied social principles and economic opportunities which, they imagined, would protect the stranger in this strange land from styles of exploitation to which he had become accustomed. Oscar Handlin cited newcomer John O'Donovan in *Boston's Immigrants*:

I am sick . . . of Ireland and the Irish and care very little what may happen; for whatever may take place things cannot be worse. . . . [I] move into the deserts of the western world there to learn a RUDE but STURDY civilization that knows not slavery or hunger.<sup>40</sup>

The confrontation between these cultures—the immigrant Celts, Italians, Jews, and others against the resident Yankees and each other—is, as you all well know, and as Lukas has recently documented, the drama that converted Boston from a homogeneous to a divided community—a tale of two or more cultures, though each opposing side thought little of the other sides' "culture." The Irish immigrant responded to Boston Brahmin hostility with strategies of accommodation, followed by aggressive Philistinism, particularly in the voice of James Michael Curley, who liked to say that "it took the Irish to make Massachusetts a fit place to live in."<sup>41</sup>

Though it would be hard to imagine from Curley's rhetoric, there has also been a strong history of cooperation between the newcomers and the resident establishment, trace elements of a synthesis formed from the cultural dialectic, images of cohesion. The early Irish-American mayors of Boston, for example, Hugh O'Brien and Patrick Collins, worked effectively with the Yankee government. In the persons of John Boyle O'Reilly, poet and editor of the *Pilot*, and John Bernard Fitzpatrick, third bishop of Boston, the Irish-American community produced model figures of immigrant consciousnesses who not only accepted but celebrated the Boston culture that Emerson and Thoreau were transcending. Boston: one man's prison, another man's promised land. O'Reilly inspired his community with newfound nativism: "no treason we bring from Erin—nor bring we shame nor guilt!" he wrote in "The Exile of the Gael"<sup>42</sup>—an attitude for which he was rewarded with the respect of the local cultural community. Similarly, Bishop Fitzpatrick had the bearing, the cultivated tastes in music, art, and literature, the Whig values and Beacon Hill tone, the living image that earned him respect in the Brahmin community.

Boston represented the immigrant's city upon a hill, his mode of ascent from the cultural bogs of Europe. There is a fine moment in James Carroll's novel *Mortal Friends* which catches this Gatsby-like yearning for the finer things. His hero, Colman Brady, an Irish immigrant, discovers Louisburg Square and finds his heart's ease.

[At] Louisburg Square he felt an enormous and inexplicable relief, as if he were seeing something for which he had been desperately searching. The harmony of construction, purpose, use, history was what moved him. This was a world in which all conflicts—architectural, cultural, esthetic—had been resolved in the perfect tension of the classic. . . . Louisburg Square was an example of what Anglo-Saxon culture at its best could achieve, and Brady, for the first time in years, felt absolutely at home.<sup>43</sup>

So begins the internal split in the Irish community between those who aspire to the Yankees' level and those who wish to level the Yankees, inside and outside Fenway Park.

If there is a single institution that articulates a single idea of Boston's cultural excellence, as Louisburg Square embodies its architectural achievement, it is Boston Latin School. John Bernard Fitzpatrick, the most influential figure in the



Boston Irish community in the nineteenth century, attended Latin School, along with Charles Sumner, Wendell Phillips, Henry Ward Beecher, and two future mayors of Boston. As Thomas H. O'Connor notes in *Fitzpatrick's Boston*, Latin School shaped Fitzpatrick's culture and consciousness.<sup>44</sup> Located in various Boston sites, it translated the idea of the city upon a hill into educational terms. Latin School offered Boston culture to the children of the Brahmin class and to the best and brightest children of the newcomers.

A century after Fitzpatrick attended, Theodore H. White walked the four miles, to save car fare, from Erie Street in Dorchester to Boston Public Latin School, then in the Fenway, and sat amid the ghosts of Franklin, various Adamases, Hancock, Emerson, Fitzpatrick, Joseph P. Kennedy, and other distinguished alumni. He also went to Hebrew school, so he retained his separate sense of cultural pride, but Latin School and later Harvard gave him the best that Boston culture had to offer. White took his opportunity and ran with it: he left Boston for New York and his first assignment in China in September 1938, on the day of the great hurricane.<sup>45</sup> Not far behind White at Boston Latin came Nat Hentoff, who, like White, daily encountered anti-Semitic "Irishers" and attended Hebrew school, though neither White nor Hentoff learned hatred or isolation from these experiences. Rather, Hentoff tells us in *Boston Boy*, Latin School constituted a world within the city where he could be transformed. It was

neutral ground when I was growing up a Boston boy. Under the purple-and-white flag of Boston Latin School, we were all united—the Irish, the Italians, the Jews, the Greeks, the Scots, the Armenians, the relatively few Yankees who still went there (the others no longer applied because all the rest of us were there), and the far fewer blacks.<sup>46</sup>

Latin School in particular, not the Boston Public Schools, has been Boston's *common ground*. Well educated, Hentoff too left Boston for New York's wider field, of jazz and journalism.

As Hentoff implies, the Boston experience has been less fortunate for its black citizens. Bill Russell has told us that Boston is a racist city. W.E.B. Du Bois stated the case against Boston most dramatically. "A colored person in Boston was more neighbor to a colored person in Chicago than to the white person across the street."<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, at Harvard, where he was befriended and supported by William James, Du Bois found a haven. Half a century later, Malcolm Little also found Boston daunting; convicted of robbery, he was sent to Norfolk Prison. In 1962, when he was known as Malcolm X, he spoke at the Harvard Law School; as he tells us in his autobiography,

I happened to glance through a window. Abruptly, I realized that I was looking in the direction of the apartment house that was my old burglary gang's hideout. . . . Scenes from my once depraved life flashed through my mind.<sup>48</sup>

Du Bois saw Boston in terms of cultural exclusiveness; Malcolm X in moral imagery, terms John Winthrop or Cotton Mather would have understood. Race has posed Boston's most extreme example of cultural juxtaposition. Both Du Bois and Malcolm X, however, found remnants of Boston's city upon a hill at Harvard. Cambridge inspired them to account for such contrasts in their writ-



ings. Arrival in Boston expanded their sense of the possible.

Yet Boston is often eloquently portrayed as a fine place to have left. Perhaps Benjamin Franklin established the route, from imprisonment in Boston to freedom elsewhere. In his autobiography, Franklin tells us how he chafed as apprentice under the direction of his brother, publisher of the *New England Courant*. Franklin's Boston meant no indulgences, so "I took it upon me to assert my Freedom," though this "Errata" gave him requisite regional guilt. He describes in detail his entry into Philadelphia so that his readers may "compare such unlikely Beginnings with the Figure I have since made there."<sup>49</sup> In short, Franklin's escape was a pilgrim's progress from bonded servitude and fixed role to a place where he could invent many useful gadgets, from stoves to glasses, and create many worthy selves. In his unfinished autobiography, Robert Lowell describes his beginnings at a point of high privilege, at 91 Revere Street, far removed in time and culture from Franklin's constricted origins. "Like Henry Adams, I was born under the shadow of the Dome of the Boston State House."<sup>50</sup> Like Franklin and Adams, Lowell too felt daunted by Boston's burden of history and role expectations. In *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*, Lowell tells us that his mother felt "barely perched on the outer rim of decency" at 91 Revere Street. "We were less than fifty yards from Louisburg Square," said her furious son, "the cynosure of old historic Boston's plain-spoken, cold roast elite—the Hub of the Hub of the Universe. Fifty yards!"<sup>51</sup> Lowell agreed with his second wife's denunciation of Boston: Elizabeth Hardwick held that Boston had "an utter absence of that wild, electric beauty of New York."<sup>52</sup> Yet Lowell, along with his first two wives, has taught us how to see Boston's doubleness. Helen Vendler, who suggests that "the *genius loci* lives only where poetry creates it," agrees:

The Boston State House, the Shaw Memorial, Beacon Street, the Boston Burying Ground . . . are different now because they are wreathed, invisibly but powerfully, in Lowell's lines.<sup>53</sup>

To get the full force of Boston's initial attraction, we must look to outsiders, to those who configure it in their imagination or experience it freshly, not those who were born in Boston or had long lived here. Robert Lowell's first wife, Jean Stafford, who was from Colorado, in her novel *Boston Adventure* invented a character who imagines Boston as a heavenly city that is the opposite of her own poor life in Chichester, a scruffy town north of Boston. Sonia prays to live on Pinckney Street. When she finally enters the home of Miss Pride, which faces Louisburg Square, she experiences a thrill of arrival similar to what James Carroll's Colman Brady felt. "Here," thinks Sonia,

as if it were an oasis chosen to delight the eyes of some favored heavenly power, the sun, hidden elsewhere by the city's smoke, shone brilliantly on white doorways and their brass trimmings.<sup>54</sup>

However, all this turns out to be more mirage than oasis for Sonia. Miss Pride's Pinckney Street is no more hospitable to a young woman than Revere Street was to the poet as a Brahmin young man, fifty yards away.

For an unambiguously celebratory vision of Boston, we must look farther

outside, to another Englishman abroad, Charles Dickens, who, like Winthrop before him, approached Boston with great expectations and a political determination to make it look good in comparison with London. Dickens's arrival stresses Boston's bright promise.

When I got into the streets upon this Sunday morning, the air was so clear, the houses were so bright and gay, the signboards were painted in such gaudy colours; the gilded letters were so very golden; the bricks were so very red, the stone was so very white, the blinds and area railings were so very green, the knobs and plates upon the street doors so marvelously bright and twinkling; and all so slight and unsubstantial in appearance—that every thoroughfare in the city looked like a scene in a pantomime.<sup>55</sup>

Dickens, of course, found qualities in Boston which were lacking in London. Dickens's city upon a hill, like Winthrop's, looked back in anger as much as it looked forward with great expectations. For all of its élan, however, we should note the diminishment of Boston from Winthrop's city upon a hill to Dickens's pantomime. (See here John Updike's description of Fenway Park as a "lusty little bandbox" in his essay on Ted Williams's final game, "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu." "Everything is painted green and seems in curiously sharp focus, like the inside of an old-fashioned peeping-type Easter egg.") In the "unsubstantial-looking" suburbs Dickens found the white wooden houses with green jalousie blinds, the small churches and chapels, so rootless and bright "that I almost believed the whole affair could be taken piecemeal like a child's toy, and crammed into a little box."<sup>56</sup>

Or a small book. F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* centers upon books written in the 1850s, largely by those in Greater Boston.<sup>57</sup> "Everyone in Cambridge appeared to be writing a book" then, said Van Wyck Brooks in *The Flowering of New England*.<sup>58</sup> (Brooks built his informing metaphor of Boston upon Oswald Spengler's theory of the "culture-cycle": New England's "flowering" withers into "Indian summer."<sup>59</sup> "What formerly grew from the soil begins to be planned. . . . What has once been vital becomes provincial."<sup>60</sup> Yet, even in its diminishment, Brooks's New England mind impressed itself upon the national consciousness, as witness Robert Frost's mediation "between New England and the mind of the rest of the nation."<sup>61</sup> Though Brooks's New England follows Spengler's pattern of cultural decline and fall, it teaches Americans that "one could be regional . . . without being provincial.") The Boston of Matthiessen and Brooks fulfilled its destiny "to lead the civilization of North America," as Emerson grudgingly admits, by producing books.<sup>62</sup>

Those who contrive visions and revisions of Boston—all imagery, like Tip O'Neill's politics, is local—do so in *books* and in full awareness that they are adding to Boston's great tradition of letters. Houghton Mifflin; Little, Brown; the Athenaeum; the Boston Public Library; and various quasi-literary clubs have all helped retain a literary presence in Boston, but Harvard and certain literary journals have been most important. Boston meant books and journals to nineteenth-century America. Consider, briefly, the cases of three literary Bostonians from the period of the American Renaissance and just after—Margaret Fuller, William Dean Howells, and Mark Twain—to sense the inner pull and outer push of Boston's literary presence.



Margaret Fuller was educated by her father to higher things than getting and spending or domesticity. "She sprang from the head of all the Zeuses about: her father, Timothy Fuller, Emerson, Goethe," said Elizabeth Hardwick recently in the *New York Review of Books*.<sup>63</sup> Hardwick thinks Fuller was "born in the wrong place," because Boston did not fully appreciate her genius. It is true that Margaret Fuller developed her rhetorical gifts in domestic settings, at gatherings in the rooms of Miss Elizabeth Peabody in West Street, rather than on the bully pulpits that men climbed; it is true that she moved to New York in 1844 to become a regular reviewer for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*. But in Boston, perhaps as in no other American place, Margaret Fuller learned devotion to what Perry Miller, her most dedicated celebrator, called "the life of the mind";<sup>64</sup> became editor of the *Dial*, the central organ of transcendentalism; and wrote *Women in the Nineteenth Century*. When Margaret Fuller said, "Let them [women] be sea-captains if they like," she appropriated Boston's nautical imagery for social and intellectual exploration.<sup>65</sup> She inspired two New England writers to create compelling literary characterization modeled upon her: the heroines of Holmes's *Elsie Venner*<sup>66</sup> and Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*. More important, she emerged from her New England education as the model of the American woman who speaks and writes in her own independent voice.

William Dean Howells was drawn to Boston by the possibility of transformation that it promised. No one has better articulated or shaped the myth of literary Boston than he. In *Life and Letters*, Howells recalls "a visiting young lady from New England" who came to Columbus, Ohio, when he was a young, provincial newspaper reporter. She "screamed at the sight of the periodical in one of our houses, 'Why, have you got the *Atlantic Monthly* out here?' " Stung, Howells assured her "there are several contributors to the *Atlantic* in Columbus."<sup>67</sup> Two, to be exact: Howells and his roommate! Howells's early life was marked by a sense of cultural deprivation, for which he imagined Boston the anodyne. In time he would marry the New England young lady, Elinor G. Mead, and become editor of the *Atlantic*, the apostolic successor to Brahmin culture.

Similarly, Howells would marry, then separate himself from, the idea of Boston. Boston was his before he was Boston's, for he created it out of his own imaginative and cultural need; he came here from the stark banks of the Ohio. Boston meant *family* to Howells, whose "whole life," he tells us, "had been passed in a region where . . . the conception of family life was very imperfect." Boston meant roots, identity, and history to Howells, though he suspected from the first that all this could be limiting, for he told James Russell Lowell that "human nature has had more ground to spread over in the West."<sup>68</sup> Still, Boston at first overwhelmed him, as he recollected forty years later in *Literary Friends and Acquaintance*.

A great city it seemed to me then, and a seething vortex of business as well as a whirl of gayety, as I saw it in Washington Street, and in a promenade concert at Copeland's restaurant in Tremont Row. Probably I brought some idealizing force to bear upon it, . . . perhaps I accounted for quality as well as quantity in my impressions of the New England metropolis. It seemed to me old . . . and very likely I credited the actual town with all the dead and gone Bostonians in my sentimental census.<sup>69</sup>



Boston, as we have seen, nurtures such “idealizing force,” inspires its observers to metaphorical reach and grasp. Howells’s Boston, at first “a seething vortex,” became in his memory, forty years later, a madeleine of remembrance of things past. Boston recollected in tranquillity seemed “like a web of old lace, which I have to take carefully into my hold for fear of its fragility, and make out as best I can the figure once so distinct in it.”<sup>70</sup> Between the vortex and the lace were Howells’s Boston-Cambridge years, when he was editor of the *Atlantic* and built the city in his novelistic imagination, much as Silas Lapham built his house in the raw Back Bay. The Lapham house burned, a symbol of Silas’s self-consuming ambition that confronts New England’s moral chill, the same iron cold that characterized the moral atmosphere of James’s *Bostonians*. Both Howells and James separated themselves from Boston’s fire and ice. Howells came to see Boston as “marred by the intense ethicism that pervaded the New England mind for two hundred years and that still characterizes it.”<sup>71</sup> Howells, therefore, demonstrates the stages of emotional development that Boston so frequently induces: first *enchantment*, as the outsider seeks to match the city upon a hill of his imagination with the Boston he sees; then *development*, as Boston prods the newcomer to articulate his full powers; finally *disenchantment*, as Boston’s narrow geographic, aesthetic, and moral territories close in. Howells escaped Boston’s snobbery, “ethicism,” and aesthetic heavy-handedness, which confused literature with sermons. New York, Boston’s antiseif, would provide Howells with more ground to spread over.

When Boston does not encourage such clear stages of perceptual development, it fosters ambivalence, as Mark Twain clearly illustrated when he decided to make sport of the Boston literati at John Greenleaf Whittier’s seventieth birthday dinner at the Hotel Brunswick, on December 17, 1877. Thirty years later he remembered his speech as “that disastrous cataclysm,” according to Justin Kaplan’s biography of Twain. Speaking before Whittier, Emerson, Holmes, and Longfellow, Twain had told the tale of western miners who complained that three tramps had stopped by their camp: Emerson, “a seedy little bit of a chap”; Holmes, “fat as a balloon”; and Longfellow, “built like a prize fighter.” Twain had been informed by one of the miners, as he told his puzzled audience, that these visitors “took over the cabin, gorged themselves on the miner’s bacon, beans, and whiskey, played cards with a greasy deck and cheated, and at seven the next morning left with the miner’s only pair of boots. ‘I’m going to move, . . . I ain’t suited to a littery atmosphere,’ ” said Twain’s miner! Howells tells us that Longfellow was puzzled, Holmes never stopped writing on his menu, and Emerson stared off into space while Twain spoke. Other guests, Twain recalled, “turned to a black frost.”<sup>72</sup> Twain had called up the image of Boston he most feared and had exorcized it with humor, though he paid the price of guilt. For Twain, Boston represented the constricting civilization that he would later have Huck leave behind. “But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can’t stand it. I been there before.”<sup>73</sup> In the landscape of Twain’s imagination, “aunt Sally” was from Boston, and he had “been there before,” at the Whittier dinner.

Despite those who resist it or leave it, there has been no end to the booking of Boston, for the city, as we have seen, has served as text for writers to impose

their imaginations upon. Howells was wrong about literary Boston, for writers come and go, drawn, as Howells and later Robert Manning drew writers, to the the *Atlantic*, drawn by Boston's proximity to summer places on the Cape and islands—Edmund Wilson's Wellfleet, John Dos Passos's Truro, Norman Mailer's Provincetown—and drawn by Boston's universities. Nor should Boston's vaunted medical facilities, particularly McLean Hospital in Belmont, be discounted as an attraction to writers. The image of Boston as *hub* suggests its radial influence as well as its concentric pull. Saul Bellow, Lillian Hellman, John Cheever, Ivan Gold, and so many more have come here to lecture or to teach. They, in turn, represent Boston in their writings, add to its evolving image.

For all that, Boston has never been easy for its inhabitants. From the beginning of the European settlement, it has offered a test of wills. Anne Bradstreet, an early arrival,

found a new world and new manners, at which my heart rose. But after I was convinced it was the way of God, I submitted to it and joined the church at Boston.<sup>74</sup>

Boston continues to possess those who come to possess it. Dan Wakefield, for example, a current Beacon Hill resident, came to Boston as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard, then returned to teach at the University of Massachusetts at Boston and write for the *Atlantic*. Boston meant refuge, from New York: see *Starting Over*; or from Hollywood: see *Selling Out*. Boston's institutions provided a haven: particularly King's Chapel, where Wakefield became a church member, and Fenway Park, where he became a Red Sox fan.

I like to cross Commonwealth Avenue and go down Marlborough, past the postage stamp-sized front yards with lovingly tended gardens, looking in lighted windows, coming out on Arlington to the Public Garden and walking beside it down Beacon and on to The Hill, the sounds of the game behind me now, the colors of the uniformed players and the Park fading like a pleasant memory as I turn down Charles and know I am home.<sup>75</sup>

In time he too "submitted to it and joined the church at Boston," or, as Frost put it in "The Gift Outright," he "found salvation in surrender."<sup>76</sup> For Wakefield, who stands for many other American writers, Boston means you *can* go home again, not back to the home place from which you escaped, but to an ideal American homeland, a national consciousness rooted in the mind. For these writers Boston embodies an idea of culture and community sometimes contradicted by its history.

Finally, Boston's most vivid literary presence has been what, in another context, Irish poet John Montague called "a flowering absence."<sup>77</sup> Its compelling image of *place* has so often been a remembrance of place or persons past or passing. John Updike connects himself to the idea of Boston by looking up Beacon Hill and recalling Robert Lowell's poetic evocation of sacrifice in "For the Union Dead."<sup>78</sup> That poem asks us to witness the gouged Common, opened for an "underworld garage," steam shovels shaking the Saint-Gaudens relief of Colonel Shaw.<sup>79</sup> Even the titles of our best fiction suggest fled glory: *The Last Puritan*, where Puritanism has its last, elegant gasp; *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, a novel that chronicles a fall much as *Boston Adventure* dramatizes an entrapment;



*The Late George Apley*, the last gasp of Brahmin Boston; and *The Last Hurrah*, the demise of high-style Irish-American politics in Boston.<sup>80</sup> We become reconciled to those groups which have ruled Boston with high and hard hands—the Yankees and the Celts, the Brahmins and the Bosses—to the extent we are persuaded by these useful fictions that their days are done.

In *The American Scene*, Henry James rediscovers remnants of the Boston in which he lived forty years before, in the early 1860s. When he returns to Beacon Hill in 1904, he confronts change but is reassured by an emblem of permanence: despite a clearance made for the enlargement of the State House, the brick house in Ashburton Place where he and his family had lived still stands, the same house in which he had heard of Hawthorne's death, the same house where he first dreamed of literary glory. Ashburton Place, for James is "a conscious memento, with old secrets to keep and old stories to witness for, a saturation of life as closed together and preserved in it as the scent lingering in a folded pocket handkerchief." Again, Boston is a reassuring, if miniaturized, emblem, akin to Updike's Easter egg or Howells's web of old lace. James, however, worked out his symbolic gloss too soon. When he returned to Beacon Hill a month later, the house was gone, razed! "It was as if the bottom had fallen out of one's own biography, and one plunged backward into space without meaning."

Yet James was unwilling to accept the idea of Boston as existential void; he reaffirmed his connection with the place by examining Boston from its topmost peak, Beacon Hill. "The top of Beacon Hill quite rakes, with but slightly shifting range, the old more definite Boston." Boston offered James conflicting images: blessedly, the Park Street Church still stood, though the faces of so many newcomers challenged his "small homogeneous Boston." Large commercial buildings suggested that "Boston, the bigger, braver, louder Boston, was 'away,' " that the Puritan "whip" had yielded to the businessman's "sponge." Yet his beloved Athenaeum still stood, the new Public Library rose in its majesty, Mount Vernon Street still resounded with implications.

To walk down Mount Vernon Street to Charles was . . . to recognize at least that we like the sense of age to come, locally, when it comes with the right accompaniments, with the preservation of character and the continuity of tradition, merits I had been admiring on the brow of the eminence.<sup>81</sup>

For James, Beacon Hill meant Boston. A beacon, a lookout, it provided a point of heightened perception and it offered a Boston of sufficient complexity to meet the requirements of his grasping imagination. On the hill, James could recompose a coherent Boston in his mind's eye out of the juxtaposed images of permanence and change before his actual eye.

From Winthrop to Wakefield, Boston has been a text in which we read our histories, ourselves. "A city that is set upon a hill cannot be hid" (Matthew 3:14). Hill, hub, common ground, peninsula, part of the mainland; landscape of sleet, snow, and moral high-pressure systems; a site suitable for memory and desire, the New Jerusalem or the next parish west of Ireland, a literary center and a political laboratory, Boston has been a place commensurate to our capacity for wonder. "We cannot escape" our environment, George Apley tells his son. "You can go to the ends of the earth but, in a sense, you will still be



in Boston.”<sup>82</sup> Marquand here, of course, twits Boston’s noted provinciality, but he also implies that Boston is memorable, a moveable feast, for what it has *meant*. From the beginning of the European settlement, Boston has been an idea, an image, a trope, a metaphor, a poem, a meditation. “New England was founded consciously, and in no fit of absence of mind,” wrote Samuel Eliot Morison in *Builders of the Bay Colony*.<sup>83</sup> So, we see, Boston remains, a city whose accumulated imagery, more than its emblems of progress, gives it a fit presence of mind. ☛

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## Notes

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4. *Ibid.*, 122.
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6. J. Anthony Lukas, *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).
7. Reported in David Arnold, “‘Common Ground’ Called Lacking by Black Leaders,” *Boston Globe*, 22 May 1986, 33.
8. Lukas, *Common Ground*, 79.
9. W. B. Yeats, “Remorse for Intemperate Speech,” in *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Macmillan Co., 1983), 254–55.
10. John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” in *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry*, ed. Perry Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 83.
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16. Lukas, *Common Ground*, 377.
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24. Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1970), 184.
25. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1983), 8.
26. Henry James, *The Europeans*, in *Three Novels: The Europeans, The Spoils of Poynton, The Sacred Fount* (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1968), 2.
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28. Elizabeth Hardwick, "Boston: The Lost Ideal," in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary American Essays*, ed. Maureen Howard (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1984), 249-61.
29. *Ibid.*, 249.
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